



# Defining SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Module 1b

Word Count = **1485 words** (not incl.  
sub-headings or direct quotations)

Defining spiritual direction requires putting words to a process of fostering a *transcendent* experience; one that lies beyond the proficiency of language, and yet the experience longs to be articulated and made concrete in everyday living. Or put another way, Barry (2005, p. 64) remarks spiritual directors are most “...interested in [the directees’] experiences of God, not [their] speculations about God. We almost have to invent a language to talk about our actual experience of God because we are so unused to speaking about it.” I have struggled to formulate (articulate) a precise definition of my own. Simply stated, I understand spiritual direction to be **helping seekers to tell (articulate) their sacred stories**; and, in the process, **develop a deeper relationship** with Self, each other and with God.

I also see this intentional process of spiritual direction as exploring a ‘deeper’ way of being more fully human – inviting a one-to-one companionship in which both parties strive to discern and increase attentiveness to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Through deep intimacy i.e. shared conversations, the directees’ deepest yearnings for relationship, love, joy, compassion, freedom and justice are explored. Such explorations are only possible if the necessary “conditions” exist. Outlined below are some of the key qualities and necessary attitudes.

## *Key qualities and attitudes necessary*

In the deeply relational presence of director and directee, there is the experience of the breaking in of the divine presence. Jesus told us directly: “Where two or three meet in my name I am there among them.” (Matt. 18:20). In the name of Jesus, there is enhanced **awareness** that director and directee both experience — a sacred moment in the presence of the one who draws them. The directee’s presence is felt perhaps most profoundly through the narrative s/he recounts. Janet Ruffing (1989, p. 97) points out:

*In spiritual direction, people frequently tell stories about experiences which are religiously significant to the narrators. These stories either have to do directly with God or with other people and life experiences which are illuminated by God’s presence [. . .]. Storytelling recreates the experience [and] affords an opportunity for the storyteller to appreciate the experience more fully and to reenter the presence of the mysterious other originally encountered in the experience.*

Expanding on the meaning of the sacred moment mentioned, Barry and Connolly (1981, p.139) state that: “Spiritual directors consciously ally themselves with the indwelling Spirit and the expression of that spirit in the desire of the directees for “more” in the way of life and union with God...” The authors refer to this as a “working alliance” — which depends very much on a mutual agreement between the director and

directee as to what the directee wants and what the director can do (1981, p. 140-41). It is the task of a spiritual director to be as transparent as possible, allowing God to relate directly to the seeker.

*"I would like to hear of your experience of God, you little and great, frail and glorious person, you who are living and struggling in this holy and confusing piece of flesh right now, in this day and age, at this moment. I would like to sit at your feet to hear the story of how God comes to you."*

Macrina Wiedekehr

For this significant spiritual direction 'alliance' to be most efficacious, I believe certain qualities are required; and I liken these qualities to ingredients used in the process of baking bread. For instance, if one takes the flour of *patient reverence*, and adds to this: sugar of (a) ample *respect*, along with the sweet water of (b) *silence*, followed up by adding the yeast of (c) attitude of *compassion*, and a pinch of (d) *spacious hospitality*, and then kneading it in with the (e) willingness to stand in 'naked truth', this should result in the rich breaking of the directee's delicious narrative 'bread of life' (John 6: 33, 48) and the sharing of same. Nemecek and Coombs (1985, p. 72) emphasize this openness: "*When directees open their heart to the director they stand exposed before him/her in naked truth... It is to let go of all facades and defenses*". And John O'Donohue (1997, p. 112) enlarges on this point when he wrote: "*One of the tasks [of Spiritual direction] is to listen compassionately and creatively to the hidden silences. Often secrets are not revealed in words, they lie concealed in the silence between the words or in the depth of what is unsayable between two people*". Openness and intuitive 'sixth sense' feelings are true hallmarks of sound spiritual direction.

The director's stance is most revealed in their response to the sharing or the narrative of the directee — and is most profoundly present in the way s/he listens. "*Be still and know that I am God*" (Ps. 46:10)... this, I believe, is where the listening of the director begins. In order to be



fully present and attentive to the directee, the director is expressed first of all through active listening, showing *spaciousness* as an important part of this attending.

To really listen like this, directors, for the entire session, leaves aside, or "dies," to their neediness. This transcending of their own needs (desires, compulsions, wants, etc.) is the cost that can bear fruit (John 12: 24-26). Our journey into God, as directors and directees, is really one of being stripped down and approaching the process in *vulnerability* and *weakness*, in our dis-grace (*lack of grace*). The important thing to understand is that, when we feel "in control" we are inevitably putting up barriers, making it more difficult for us to be aware of God's graciousness. It is when we are conscious of our own shortcomings and fragility, not a morbid self-pitying way but consciously acknowledging the totality of our personality, that we tend to be mostly receptive to the promptings and presence of God's Holy Spirit. By "letting go" and letting God, the director becomes present to his / her own deepest (true) self through volitional capitulation. Nemecek and Coombs (1985, p. 62) seem to support this argument, "...listening is unconditional surrender to Abba. Listening is a giving of our deepest to him whose depth has no end."





## *A personal direction experience*

Back in 2008, under the guidance of my spiritual *sensei* Dr. Chris Brown, I underwent a *Reflective Day* at Chris' quiet little retreat place in Caloundra. I found the surroundings quite comfortable and Chris and Marilyn incredibly hospitable; they made me feel right at home from the moment I arrived. The entire day had been graciously planned, and participation was the only thing asked of me (as every other detail had been meticulously catered for). The couple literally oozed "spaciousness"; so much so, that by the end of the day I didn't want to part their company.

Although the entire day was planned out, Chris made it clear that my time was my own to do with what I pleased; and then offered a one-hour individual 'session' to personally sit with me to explore any themes that might have emerged out of the *lectio divina* planned. Chris definitely uses a narrative approach to spiritual direction, engaging the directee "... *in a process of self-understanding in light of his experience of God*" and Chris himself undertakes "... *a hermeneutical process, namely, understanding the directee's account of his life story and experience of God.*" (Ruffing, 1989, 45)

Employing a quasi-structured program, Chris suggested we consider four simple movements which might offer some guidance: (1) **separation** from what occupies me, (2) "**letting go**" of that which occupies me, (3) having the time (and sacred space) to "**hide our life with Christ in God**", and finally (4) find a **celebratory word**, metaphor or symbol to provide me with a re-entry into everyday existence. The first thing I noticed was this huge knot in my shoulders and neck muscles from the night before, and the chronic headache I arrived with. As we commenced the first movement of separation through quiet, reflective music and then *via* contemplative prayer, I began noticing the tensions in my body began draining away, and my mind gradually clearing from its previous chaotic, cluttered state.

Chris offered to use *lectio divina* and reflect specifically on Scripture from John 12:23-28. My mind was flooded with thoughts, as I began to wonder why he chose *that particular* entry point into our personal "descent journey". At first glance, it appeared to offer up rich metaphors like death, letting go, burial, and abiding. I struggled to hold my mental gyrations at bay, while I sought to "quiet my soul" during the entire process. By the completion of the day (walking on the beach, pacing the floor, quietly reading, silent prayer, weeping, and even resting) I felt something like a deeper yearning for more of God; and a subsequent thirst which left me parched... only to endure the worst suffering of my life! This suffering, ironically, instilled a desire in me more than ever before for a whole new, more satisfying and spiritual life.



*“Being present to the heart of the other, looking with love to the essence of the other—this is what releases the true depths in one another.”*

Phillip Newell

From my day with Chris, I learnt spiritual direction is all about exploring inner, foreign landscapes and via an intentional process, discovering a new way of seeing and a renewed realisation of “the giftedness in our wounded-ness”. As I retreated “in & down”, I found myself not so controlling or judgmental as I’m used to being. Instead, I sought more deeply the opposite emotions. And as I did this, I felt myself struggling to integrate the personal and the transpersonal, the emotional and the sacred.

Experience became my “teacher” as it offered me direction and leading to a greater, more in-depth recognition of God’s calling on my life. I often felt fear, yet somehow, curiously expectant for “something” bigger which might loom on the spiritual horizon. I began searching the Scriptures for deeper truths; a deeper and more complete understanding of just how God seeks me out, and a more full understanding of what really matters to me... and to God. Often, the deeper truths revealed came in the form of paradoxes... paradoxes such as Jesus’ teaching, “if you lose your life you will find it” (John 12:24) and Saul’s Damascus road experience, that it’s only when we’re blind that we truly begin seeing. (Acts 9:3-20)

As strange as it might seem, the paradox of crisis experienced only prompted me to wrestle harder, like Jacob, in order to encounter the ‘real’ Truth (Luke 1:4; John 1:14, 17; 3:33; 8:32; 14:6). Engaging with ‘the naked Truth’ always leads towards lasting change, in my experience. Finding Truth in paradox has helped me to become more aware of how my own “I am” story fits into the greater “I AM” story (John 8:58).

## References

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